

To Be Made Whole

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Category: Magnificent Seven  
Genre: Adventure  
Language: English  
Status: In-Progress  
Published: 2000-02-01 09:00:00  
Updated: 2000-02-01 09:00:00  
Packaged: 2016-04-27 12:53:20  
Rating: K+  
Chapters: 1  
Words: 12,888  
Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)  
Summary: Continuation of the Story "The Accused"

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[This is a continuation of the story "The Accused" by me]

Two weeks had gone by since Ezra had left Four Corners. Life went on as life usually does. The six remaining lawmen continued to break up the occasional brawl and rare bank robbery, they even took out a gang of cattle thieves who were terrorizing the surrounding ranches.

The six did their jobs as always, but anyone entering the town would immediately feel the underlining tension amongst the townsfolk. It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never would. Yes, the six lawmen did their jobs, but something was missing.

Anyone passing in the street heard the yelling coming from the jail house, but were surprised when their young sheriff came flying out the door to land in the dirt. JD sat up on one elbow rubbing his jaw as Buck glared at him from the doorway, turned and stormed off. Anger flashed in JD's own dark eyes as he sat in the dirt watching Buck walk away, then his eyes soften as he realized it was the first time that his friend had ever hit him out of anger.

Buck's strides were determined and fast trying to rid himself of the frustration he felt. He couldn't believe he had hit the kid. He wasn't even sure why? Nothing felt right, his normal care-free attitude had deserted him and he felt numb, which was something the once gregarious cowboy was not use to. JD slowly staggered to his feet. He felt weak, but knew it wasn't from the punch he received from Buck. His adopted family was falling apart around him and he didn't know what to do about it. He watched as Buck headed towards

the saloon not even turning around to look back.

Chris and Vin had words on more than one occasion. Vin would voice his concern over Chris' drinking and Chris would tell him to mind his own business. Chris would then ask the tracker why he stayed by himself so much? Neither one able to give an answer. These verbal barbs would usually end with Chris taking a swig of whiskey and Vin leaving in disgust.

Nathan's usually congenial bedside manner gave way to a more impersonal demeanor. He had lost interest in helping Josiah refurbish the church. In fact, none of the six men had helped in over two weeks. One day Josiah took a special dislike to a certain wall and applied a sledge hammer to it knocking a hole big enough for his massive form to walk through. Even the extreme physical exertion failed to erase the guilt and frustration that had taken up residence in the ex-preacher's soul. Mary felt like she was walking on egg shells whenever she was around Chris. She was also trying to deal with her own demons at how she had treated Ezra. Vin started leaving town more frequently and staying away longer. They all were withdrawing into themselves neither one able to face the others.

The six no longer felt whole. A part of them was missing and everyone felt it, but no one could understand it. Chris was the most surprised at how much Ezra's leaving had effected them all. In the beginning he had always believed that the southern gambler would be the first to leave their elite little group, but as time went by he wasn't so sure. Ezra seemed to need them as much if not more than they needed him. Chris knew Ezra didn't have a good childhood and hid a lot of his emotions behind that damn wall he sometimes put up. Chris threw back the shot he had been holding as his mind wandered, he now had more guilt to eat away at his already bitter soul.

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On the rare night that six gunfighters found themselves together. They were the only customers in the saloon, being most patrons were afraid to be in the same room with all of them. They sat in silence listening to the distant thunder of an approaching storm all lost in their own thoughts. The batwing doors started to sway as the storm grew in intensity. The several lanterns flickered distorting the shadows within the solemn saloon. The six men sat together in an uncomfortable silence.

Josiah's tired eyes looked over the group of disheartened men. He had always thought that they were somehow all connected, that fate had brought them together for a reason. Now, as he felt the emptiness inside, he knew it was true and he knew they had to do something soon or lose everything they all once craved and they all needed.

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Early the next morning Mary looked out her office window to see Chris crossing the street with determined strides, his saddle bags over his shoulder. She smiled.

Just as Larabee was about to enter the stables the doors opened and Buck came out leading his horse, followed by Vin, JD, Nathan, and Josiah. JD led two horses and handed the reins of one to Chris, who

smiled at the young gunslinger. He looked up at the five men as they mounted their horses and settled into their saddles for a long hard ride. His blue eyes revealed the love he had for these men and the connection they all shared.

"Well, it's about time you showed up cowboy," Vin stated with a smile that had been all too rare lately. Chris shook his head as his own mouth twitched. He tied his saddle bags behind his saddle and mounted nudging his horse to the front.

The whole town watched as the six gunslingers paraded down the street. Judge Travis stepped out onto the boardwalk. Over the past couple weeks the esteemed Judge looked like he had aged ten years. He still hadn't forgiven himself for the part he played in Standish's departure.

"Mr. Larabee, when will you return?" The Judge asked as Chris neared.

Chris kept his eyes forward, his back straight as he answered, "We won't come back without him."

The Judge frowned at this, but didn't say a thing. Vin rode by next, tipping his hat. Josiah and Nathan followed, riding side by side.

"Mr. Dunne, you are still Sheriff here," Judge Travis reminded the young man.

JD pulled up his horse causing Buck to stop behind him. Buck wouldn't blame the young man if he stayed. He had a responsibility and Buck understood how important that was to him. JD reached over to his vest and removed the silver star on his chest dropping it at the Judge's feet. He spurred his horse forward to catch up with the others. Buck tipped his hat unable to hide the grin on his face. He was never more proud of his young friend.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 2

It took a couple days to determine what direction Ezra had taken after leaving Four Corners. The six gunslingers stopped at every town, every homestead and every ranch along the trail, hoping to pick up some information about where the wayward gambler might be heading. Everyone was grateful that summer was taking its time coming. The trail and surrounding areas were lush with a myriad of greens, interspersed with the vibrant colors of wildflowers against the backdrop of the overlapping foothills. Everyone's disposition had improved immeasurably. The decision to go after Ezra and bring him home had eased some of the guilt and the building restlessness they all felt. Even Chris managed to relax and enjoy the scenery and the company of his five friends. Buck and JD suddenly broke the silence with one of their verbal bouts, which was music to everyone's ears.

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Ezra wandered haphazardly from town to town for over a week. When he left Four Corners he had no idea where he was going. For awhile he kept looking over his shoulder expecting to see one or more of the others following him, but as time went by he realized he was totally

alone. He would sit in the saddle, absently shuffling his cards to pass the time, letting his horse pick its way along the rutted, well-used trail, not really paying attention or caring where the horse went. He tried to contemplate a future. He thought of trying to catch up with his mother, but dismissed this thought almost immediately. If he got back with her, he'd be under her control forever. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't seem to see a future, at least not one alone.

He continued to ride into any town he happened across, no matter how seedy, as long as it had a saloon. He had been trying to return to his previous way of life, but was finding it difficult.

"Okay fancy man, I think you're cheatin', I'm callin' you out," the presumptuous young man sneered. He stood, shoving his chair back. His hand hovering near his gun, which was the fanciest and shiniest item on his otherwise tattered attire. He had lost every bit of money he had to the southern gambler who remained seated raking in the pot. Everyone in the saloon backed up, giving space to the two men.

Ezra saw the fear, the young man was trying to hide behind a wall of false bravado. He was probably trying to make a name for himself and thought drawing down on a gambler would be easy.

"Sir, I have no need to cheat someone who plays so badly," Ezra berated.

The young man clenched his jaw at the slight.

Ezra had no wish to harm the young man and hoped he could end this with both of them walking out alive. He slowly stood, his green eyes coming level with the youth's brown ones. He saw the young man take a deep breath trying to calm himself.

Ezra drew his pistol so fast the man's eyes widen and he stepped back moving his hand away from his gun. "Sir, you'd of died of a real bad case of slow," Ezra's drawl dripped with malice. He was tired and wasn't in the mood to teach a child a lesson. He reached down and picked up the shot glass tossing back the liquor. He slowly backed out of the saloon keeping his gun in hand. He decided to spend the night out on the prairie just incase the young man forgot how lucky he was and decided to try and even the score by shooting him in the back. He never realized how much he had relied on the others to protect his back before.

Ezra laid under the blanket of night, his arms under his head, looking up at the stars. He was use to being alone, he'd been alone most of his life, why was it bothering him now. He found it hard to return to his previous way of life. Hell, he let one man win when he found out he was trying to get enough money so he could get married. What was wrong with him? He was on his own again, no one to worry about or care about. No one asking if he was okay or forcing him to get up at some ungodly hour to get shot at. He should be happy. He made sure his guns were close before closing his eyes. Wondering how the others were doing.

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Five of the gunslingers were at the bar waiting for Vin to return. They had been on the trail of the elusive gambler for over a week now

and every time they seemed to get close they'd lose him. This was the third town they'd been through in as many days, hoping that someone had seen their missing friend.

"I never thought it would be so hard to find one fancy dressed gambler?" Buck grumbled, downing the last of his beer.

Vin quietly appeared at Buck's side startling the mustached cowboy. "Gawd dang it, don't do that, now I know where Ezra got his sneakiness," Buck again griped, causing Vin's smile to grow.

"He was here the sheriff had him locked up for drunk and disorderly," Vin stated for all to hear.

"What happened?" Buck asked.

"He left him alone. Sheriff's real ticked. No one's ever broke out of his jail before," Vin replied with a grin. Chris passed the buckskin-clad tracker a beer.

"When?" Chris calmly asked.

"Five days ago," Vin replied.

"Five days," Buck repeated as he slumped over the bar. His tone laced with exasperation. He was starting to believe they'd never catch up with Ezra. JD put an assuring hand on the bigger man's shoulder.

Chris slung back the last of his beer, turned and walked away.

"What's wrong with Chris?" JD asked.

"We're not getting any closer. We don't even know where he's going. He just seems to be drifting from town to town," Nathan answered the young gunslinger.

"Yeah, but have you all noticed, he's staying in the area?" Vin remarked and followed Chris.

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"Why hasn't he headed back to St. Louis or South Carolina or even California?" Vin asked the other men circled around the crackling fire trying to make sense of Ezra's wanderings. For a man who reveled in the niceties of society Ezra was sure living a nomadic existence.

"He's as lost as we are," Josiah quietly stated getting everyone's attention. Josiah looked up at the five men, the low fire highlighting the dark shadows on their faces. "He feels it too, something is missing, something is just not right. I think he's trying to return to his previous life."

Chris looked down into the coffee he was holding. He never really went for Josiah's spiritualism until now. There was no denying what was happening and what they all were feeling. Were the Seven of them fated and destined to remain together?

"What if we never find him, what's going to happen to us?" JD innocently voiced. Everyone looked up, their faces showing that no one had an answer.

"Why would he think he ran?" Nathan absently asked, bringing everyone's attention to bear and a somber spell to fall upon them all. Nathan couldn't get the thought out of his head and decided to put his thoughts into words. "When Ezra left, he said it was because he believed he had run out, causing the death of Judge Travis' godson, even though it had been Major Quist who had run."

"We convinced him," Josiah quietly muttered. "We believed he did, he trusted us, so he started believing it."

No one said a word, as they knew it was true.

Buck decided to try and lighten up the somber conversation.

"Okay, I have one question that's been buggin' me, how can a man who plays cards all night, sleeps half the day and avoids menial labor like the plague stay in such good shape?" Buck asked tipping back the bottle of red-eye they were sharing and looking around the circle for an answer.

Josiah hid a knowing smile. He had accidentally come across the southern gentleman a half mile outside of town where he had a punching bag set up. Ezra was a very accomplished boxer, which Josiah had already assumed after seeing the smaller man fight. Ezra had told him he learned to box at a very young age seeing that most of the bullies were bigger than him and he needed a way to protect himself. As he got older and relied more on his wit and guns to get him out of trouble he still found the art of boxing very relaxing and fulfilling and it did help to keep him in shape. He practiced for up to two hours four or five days a week. He had extracted a promise of silence from the ex-preacher, which he intended to keep.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 3

It was another saloon in another town, a little over forty miles south of Four Corners. The bartender stepped out from the back room to look upon six formidable men he hoped didn't mean trouble.

"Sir, we're looking for a friend of ours, brown hair, green eyes real fancy dresser and a gambler," Chris explained.

"Oh him, yeah he was here," the bartender answered with a grin relaxing a little.

"When," Vin asked.

"Oh, three days ago."

"You're sure," Josiah asked.

"Couldn't forget him there are two men still up at the Doc's place who won't ever forget him," the bartender explained with a twinkle in his eye.

"What are you talking about," Chris ventured to asked.

"He was in here three days ago, early, just as I opened up. Two others came in shortly afterwards. Jack McDermott who works out at one of the nearby ranches and another ranch hand. At first the men kept there distance from each other. Your friend just grabbed a bottle of whiskey and sat in a corner by himself. Then Miguel came in."

"Whose Miguel?" Nathan asked.

"He's this little Indian boy who sweeps up for me before the evening crowd. Well, I went to the back room and apparently McDermott and his buddy decided to have a little fun with Miguel."

Chris hung his head knowing where this was going.

"The next thing I hear is a gunshot. I grab my gun and look out onto the bar room and there on the floor is McDermott holding his balls and his buddy holding his knee, your friend standing over them holding Miguel behind him. Miguel had a bruise on his cheek where McDermott had hit him." The bartender shook his head and grinned at the incident. McDermott had always been a bully he finally met someone who put him in his place.

"Your friend gave me some money so I could pay the doc to fix 'em up then left."

"Any charges brought up?" Josiah asked.

"Nah, those two would of hurt the boy if your friend hadn't protected him."

"He didn't happen to say which way he was goin'?" Buck asked.

"Nope, sorry," the bartender replied seeing the disappointment appear on all six of the gunslinger's faces.

"Thanks." The six gunslingers prepared to leave.

"Oh one more thing gentlemen, you're not the only ones who asked about him," the bartender added.

The six men turned as one. "What?" Chris asked fear rising in his throat high enough where he could taste it.

The look in Larabee's face made the bartender bite his lip berating himself for saying anything. "Yeah, the next day a big fellow with short dark hair came around asking about him," he nervously explained.

"What did you tell 'im?" Chris asked.

"Same as I told you all. He didn't seem impressed though and infact got sorta angry. When he left he reminded me of a soldier, just turned and marched right out."

The six men left the saloon. "It can't be? Why would the Major be after him, hasn't he done enough?" JD asked as he mounted his horse.

"Chris, didn't the Judge say he was goin' to do time in some military prison," Vin asked, checking his cinch before swinging up into the saddle.

"Yeah, we'll wire the Judge and see if he knows anything," Chris replied.

"His twisted mind must blame Ezra for everything that happened to him," Josiah explained. His heart ached with fear for his gambling friend. Ezra was probably totally unaware he was being tracked by a madman.

"Lord, we have to find his southern ass before the Major does," Nathan added, with more fear and concern than anyone had ever heard from the dark healer, especially for the southern conman. Chris' heart beat hard in his chest and his fist clenched tight around the reins in helpless rage. If the Major caused more harm to Ezra he would exact his own type of punishment this time.

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The six men continued heading south hoping it was the right direction. Vin felt himself drawn to a nearby ranch. Chris had learned early on to trust in the tracker's gut feelings and this time was no different. Ezra had stopped by the ranch after his horse picked up a stone. The rancher's two beautiful daughters had fed the handsome conman and hung on every southern syllable. They were able to tell the six gunslingers that Ezra had turned west, but he'd hadn't mentioned any specific destination.

The next saloon they entered they were greeted with piles of broken tables and chairs. Glass and debris had been swept to the side and a couple people were replacing the front window. They saw a thin, wiry man holding a broom and picking through the pile of broken glass trying to salvage any glassware that might still be useful.

"Ah, Sir, maybe you can help us we're looking for a friend of ours," Josiah inquired, taking in the devastation and getting a bad feeling.

The thin man straightened and placed an arm on top of his broom handle. He looked up at the huge ex-preacher.

"He's a real fancy dresser, a gambler..." Josiah continued when he got the man's attention.

Josiah couldn't finish his description as the man raised his broom up and anger contorted his impassive features.

"If I ever see that smooth talkin' son-of-a-bitch again I'll kill 'em, look what he did to my bar!" The man was practically yelling brandishing his broom causing the six gunslingers to slowly back out. Buck, Vin and JD were trying desperately to hold back the grins, which wanted to come to their faces.

As they left the bar, Buck busted out laughing, almost somersaulting over the railing. JD, Vin and Nathan joined in laughing until tears streamed down their face. Even Chris couldn't hide the smile.



"Ezra's gone plum-loco!" Nathan gasped out as he tried to control the fits of laughter.

"We better find him before he gets himself killed," Chris stated bringing everyone down from their boisterous hilarity and back to a more sober reality.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 4

Ezra was trying to enjoy himself in the poker game, but his heart wasn't really in it. In fact, over the last couple days his heart hadn't been in it. Luckily the people he played didn't really offer a challenge and he was able to win most games and accumulate a sizable amount of financial security. He nursed a bottle of whiskey as he folded sitting back in his chair. He knew the man to his right was cheating, but he didn't even feel like calling him on it. He looked over to the man on his left, a farmer by the looks of him, about Chris' build and age...Lord, he had to stop comparing everyone to his previous associates. The farmer had light brown hair and the look of desperation in his hazel eyes. At one time Ezra would of pounced on this weakness, like a lion going in for the kill, but today the prey would escape. There was a couple hundred dollars in the pot and the farmer was studying his cards intently, absently rubbing his thumb along his bottom lip, just like Vin would...Stop it! Ezra inwardly chastised himself and took a swig of whiskey, watching the confrontation that was unfolding before him. The person across from him folded, which left only the farmer and the cheater, who glared hungrily across the table at his victim. Ezra took another swallow and saw the perspiration break out on the farmer's forehead. The farmer reached into his thread bare coat pocket and pulled out a piece of paper laying it on the table.

"This is the deed to my farm," he stammered, looking across the table.

Ezra stopped in mid swallow and put the bottle down. It was one thing to lose money quite another to put your home on the line, especially on a crooked game.

"Sir," Ezra drawled, slightly inebriated. "You really don't want to do that."

"Shut up, this is none of your business," the other sneered. Ezra glared at the cheater and picked up the deed handing it back to the bewildered farmer.

"This man is cheating, he has two aces up his sleeve," Ezra calmly remarked.

"Why you son-of-a..." the man yelled drawing his gun. Ezra ejected his derringer and fired, striking the man in the head. The cheater's trigger finger twitched as he fell to the wooden floor, causing his gun to discharge hitting Ezra in the shoulder. A nearby patron checked the dead man's sleeve and pulled out two aces.

The farmer regarded Ezra with a mixture of astonishment and gratitude. "Mister, I owe you one," he stammered.

"Sir, your gratitude is misplaced. I did nothing but save my own hide, and I wasn't entirely successful in that endeavor." Ezra winced

and grabbed at his shoulder as pain raced down his arm, numbing his fingers. The farmer got up and came to his side, pulling open his jacket.

"Damn, that looks bad. C'mon I'm taking you to my place, my wife can fix you up."

"Sir, that won't be necessary you are under no obligation to..." Ezra began as he tried to stand. His head spun and he had to use his uninjured arm to grab hold of the table so he wouldn't fall. The farmer grabbed him throwing his uninjured arm over his shoulder and leading him out not giving Ezra a chance to object.

"I won't take no for an answer, you're hurt," the farmer insisted.

Ezra looked at the man and had to swallow the sudden lump in his throat.

Anna and Hiram Stopka and their son Tommy had only recently come west from Virginia. They had used every bit of their savings to purchase a small homestead and farm, everything was perfect until they discovered they had been swindled. The person who sold them the homestead did not own the land. The Stopka's needed \$500 by the end of the month or they would be evicted. Hiram had decided to take a chance and try to win the money playing poker, even though his gambling skills were sorely lacking. He told Ezra this as they rode out in his wagon to his modest farm.

"Why would you wager your deed?" Ezra asked clenching his teeth as the wagon encounter another pot hole sending a sharp pain streaking between his shoulder blades.

"I figured I had nothing to lose, this was my last chance. There's no way I can come up with \$500 in less than two weeks, either way I lose the farm." Hiram released a long shaky breath. He looked over at Ezra who had become slightly pale and urged the team faster.

Darkness enshrouded everything by the time they reached the homestead. Ezra was only barely conscious as Hiram helped him down from the wagon and led him to the house. The door opened releasing some of its warming light onto the porch. A slender, blond haired woman met them at the door a wry smile on her oval face.

"Get some water boiling, Anna. He's been shot," Hiram said as he helped Ezra to a back room and laid him down upon a soft bed. Anna was only mildly surprised at the injured stranger her husband was struggling with. He was always one to help another; that was one of the things she loved most about him. Hiram lit a kerosene lamp which sat on a rough-hewed table and removed Ezra's jacket, weapons and boots. Anna came into the room carrying bandages and a basin of water, followed by a young tow-head boy.

"Who is he, pa?" The young boy asked, his eyes lit with excitement as he took in the stranger's fancy clothes and the derringer strapped to his arm.

"He saved our farm and probably my life," Hiram murmured ignoring his wife's concerned glare as he removed Ezra's blood soaked shirt. Ezra moaned slightly and tried to swipe Hiram's hand away.

"Easy son, don't worry we'll take care of ya," Hiram gently uttered placing his hand on Ezra's chest to stop him from rising. The words seemed to calm the agitated gambler down and he surrendered to the calling darkness.

Anna looked down at the stranger's blood covered chest and knew her questions would have to wait. She immediately went to work on the gambler's shoulder. The bullet was still in there, but it wasn't too deep. She expertly removed it and then cleaned and bandaged the wound. She could feel the fever that was already building within his weakened and pain ridden body. She drew the blankets up to his chest and left him to sleep.

Anna took time to put Tommy to bed. He was going to have to sleep in their room since the stranger now occupied his bed. Anna returned moments later to find her husband sitting in the huge chair, which sat in front of the fireplace, staring morosely into the flickering orange and red flames.

"Do you know who he is, Hiram?" Anna asked, not masking the worry she felt. She had seen the small arsenal that the stranger carried and noticed several bullet scars on his muscular body. This was a man who had been in many dangerous situations.

"His name is Ezra Standish. He's just a gambler I met in the saloon."

"Well, how did he get shot? And what's this about saving our farm?" Anna angrily asked her husband.

Hiram bowed his head unable to look his wife in the eye. "I got desperate I bet the deed." He heard her small intake of breath. "Ezra stopped me and the other guy got mad, it's my fault he was shot." Hiram put his head into his hands feeling his wife's delicate hand on his shoulder. He brought a hand up and grasped her slender fingers. "I've never seen anyone so fast, the other guy had gone for his gun first, but Ezra still managed to shoot him." Anna caught the awe in her husband's voice. "Ezra killed the man, but not before taking a bullet."

Anna looked at the closed door with worried eyes, she didn't want any trouble coming to her family and that man looked like trouble followed him where ever he went.

Ezra's fever grew worse during the night and Anna stayed by his side moping his brow with cool water. She listened to his quiet ramblings and started to see the insecure little boy inside the aloof man. Much of his murmurings she couldn't understand, but parts mirrored her own life, especially the parts about being alone. She would definitely have to get to know this man better.

\*\*\*\*\* Part 5

Ezra woke late the next morning, a sliver of sunlight breaking through the heavy curtains. His eyes took awhile to focus, but his hazy mind couldn't make sense of the unfamiliar surroundings. The room was small with a couple hand-made toys neatly stacked on a shelf on the other side of the room. A colorful, twill rug covered most of the wood floor. He tried to push himself up as the door opened

allowing a young woman to slip in. She noticed he was awake and came to his side laying the tray of food she carried on the nearby table. She placed a slender hand on his now cool forehead.

"How you feeling?" She asked the bewildered gambler, propping up his pillow to make him more comfortable. The woman was probably only a couple years older than him with long blond hair. She wasn't what you call beautiful. The harsh life of the frontier had a way of robbing surface beauty, but left a stronger inner beauty.

Ezra winced slightly at the pain in his shoulder. "Better," he replied to the woman standing before him.

"I'm Anna, Hiram's wife. He brought you here last night," she reminded him seeing the confusion in his green eyes.

Remembrance flickered into his eyes. "Thank you for taking care of my shoulder." Ezra's quiet southern drawl brought a smile to her face. He revised his first thought, 'She was pretty.' Ezra threw his legs over the side of the bed preparing to get up, relieved that he still had his pants on.

"Whoa, what do you think you're doing?" Anna surprisingly asked as she moved closer prepared to bodily restrain him.

"Madam, I've been enough of an imposition." Ezra tried to stand, but immediately fell back as a wave of dizziness washed over him. He closed his eyes to fight off the nausea that flowed through him.

Hiram entered, he had been working out in the fields since sunrise and was already covered in sweat and dirt. He saw Ezra try to stand and immediately sit back down his face turning an ugly shade of white right before his eyes.

"Listen Mr. Standish, you're not going anywhere until my wife says you're fit to do so, even if I have to hog tie ya to the bed."

Ezra smiled and shook his head. "Lord, you sound like Nathan."

"Who?" Hiram asked.

Ezra raised his head. "Just someone I once knew."

Anna saw the buoy of sadness drift across Ezra's sea green eyes. Tommy wiggled in under his father's arm and stared excitedly at Ezra.

"My husband is right Mr. Standish, we would of lost the farm..." she paused pressing her lips together in a tight firm line. She glanced at her husband and continued, "lost it sooner, if it hadn't been for you or Hiram could have been killed. Now you just stay in that bed." Anna came over and grabbed Ezra's legs swinging them back up. "And you need to eat to keep up your strength."

Ezra laid back against the headboard realizing he was too weak to argue, and the bed did feel good. Hiram put a loving arm around his wife and the two left the room to give the gambler some privacy. Tommy had managed to secret himself in a corner. Ezra leaned over to

grab a muffin from the tray and saw the boy silently standing. He smiled motioning for him to come closer.

"Hi, my name's Tommy, what's yours?" the boy blurted out without the slightest hesitation or fear.

"You can call me Ezra."

"Are you a gunslinger?"

This caused Ezra's heart to ache and his eyes to cloud over, but he kept the smile on his face for the boy.

"No Tommy, I'm not a gunslinger."

"My pa says he never seen anyone draw as fast as you."

Ezra chuckled. "Well, if I was a might bit faster, I might not of been the unfortunate recipient of the knave's bullet."

Tommy stared at Ezra bewildered. "I wouldn't of been shot," Ezra explained with a chuckle.

"Yeah, but then I'd never of met ya," Tommy honestly said.

Ezra smiled and shook his head at the young boy's logic. Anna peered into the room seeing Tommy sitting on the bed sharing breakfast with the mysterious gentleman. Ezra was telling the boy some story and had his undivided attention. Both looked happy and the gambler seemed quite at ease with her son. Anna had never met a gambler like Mr. Standish and she had met her share in her life. He wasn't your usual unscrupulous type, which seemed to be the more common personality trait amongst gamblers. There was something more, a lot more to this man.

Later that afternoon Ezra managed to get out of bed and make it out to the large comfortable chair in front of the fireplace. The house was quiet and he suspected everyone was out doing their chores. He loved the feeling of family which seemed to fill every corner of the small home, but he also felt like an intruder. His thoughts drifted back to the family he left in Four Corners. He had felt like an intruder even amongst them, though he had thought he was finally being accepted and learning to trust and accept them, until the prior incident revealed everyone's true colors.

Ezra woke still in the chair someone had draped a blanket over him. He didn't open his eyes, but heard the crackling of the fire in the fireplace and the rhythmic creaking of a nearby rocking chair. He slowly opened his eyes to see Anna quietly knitting across the small room. When she noticed he was awake she put her sewing aside.

"How are you feelin, Mr. Standish?"

"Much better thank you, and please call me Ezra."

Anna blushed slightly. "Is there anything I can get you, Ezra?"

"Maybe just some water."

"I'll get it," Tommy called out. Ezra hadn't realized that the boy was in the room with them.

"My husband will be in shortly he's just bedding down the stock," Anna explained and picked up her sewing. Tommy brought Ezra a small cup of water which he took giving the exuberant youth a smile. The warm fire and the coziness of the cabin warmed his aching body and soul. Hiram entered the warmth of the small cabin and flopped his lanky body down in a chair.

"It's good to see you up and around Mr. Standish."

"Thanks to your wife's fine administrations I should be fine enough to travel tomorrow," Ezra said. He felt as much as saw the disappointed look appear on Tommy's face.

"Mr. Standish, you're welcome to stay for as long as you like," Anna told him. She could always read people pretty good and she felt that Ezra was a good man.

Ezra smiled, he hated to go, but the feelings that were being dredged up were almost more than he could handle. These people reminded him of everything he had lost.

"I'm sorry, but my mother is expecting me in California shortly," he lied.

"We understand," Hiram said trying to alleviate some of the discomfort he knew Ezra was feeling. "I'll take you to town to fetch your horse after breakfast tomorrow."

Ezra looked over at the boy whose head was bowed, he seemed to be examining his hands. Ezra placed his hand under the boy's chin and raised his face up to meet his. The boy's large eyes glistened with unshed tears. "What if I tell you about the legend of six courageous gunslingers?" Ezra said bringing a smile to Tommy's face. Ezra helped situate the boy upon his lap then took another sip of water. He began to weave a tale of life in the wild west his words painting pictures in everyone's mind.

"Once, a long time ago in a very wild and growing town there were six gunslingers who protected it from various miscreants." Ezra's voice took on a far off quality, as he continued, "The leader was fearless with a hardened heart and a gentle soul. He dressed all in black with eyes like blue ice, which could drop a man dead in his tracks just by staring at him. If he went for his gun you might just as well lay down and die."

"Was he as fast as you?" Tommy broke in.

"Yes, I believe he was," Ezra replied with a smile. "The tracker had the eyes of a hawk and the heart of a saint. He could track anyone or anything across a calm lake or barren rock, and could shoot the eyes out of a rattlesnake half a mile away." Tommy was totally mesmerized even Hiram and Anna found themselves pulled into the world Ezra was creating. "The healer could pull a bullet out of you before you even realized you were shot while protecting your back at the same time. The preacher's voice could soothe a wolf and make it lie down with the lamb." Ezra's eyes began to water and he took a deep quivering breath. He was glad the room had darkened with the coming night. "The

Kid was fast with a heart of gold, always seeking adventure. He would lay down his life for anyone as would the others. The charmer had a heart and grin as big as Texas and would follow any one of the others to hell and back. They were all brothers in spirit."

"Did they kill people?" Tommy asked.

"They only killed when they had no other choice or when one of their own was threatened, and God or the devil protect the person that brought harm to any one of them. There was a time when five rather notorious outlaws came to town. The six gunslingers were waiting for them. The five outlaws took one look at the hardened and dangerous men and laid down their weapons without firing a shot."

Ezra continued to recount stories of the six gunslinger's escapades, losing himself in the memories. Each story becoming more astonishing with each telling.

"Tommy dear, it's time for bed, say good night to Mr. Standish," Anna quietly broke the spell between her son and Ezra.

"You won't leave before sayin' good-bye would ya," Tommy innocently asked.

Ezra put on his best appalled expression. "Sir, I would be a cad to do such a thing."

Tommy gave Ezra a hug which he returned trying to capture and hold onto the feeling for as long as he could. He didn't know when or if he'd ever have that feeling again.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 6

The slow, tired plodding of the six horses mimicked the feelings of their riders as they made their way down the main street of the town, pulling up in front of the saloon. It was mid morning and they hoped to find someone who had seen Ezra. They had been forced to backtrack several times over the last day and a half and weren't even sure if they were still on the elusive conman's trail. After almost two weeks in the saddle they were all tired and haggard looking, even JD's usual exuberance was now overshadowed with the discouragement and fatigue that dragged at his body.

"Alright, let's see if anyone is in the saloon, if not, we'll take a couple hours to eat and get cleaned up and check back later after we check the hotel and restaurant," Chris explained. They hadn't come across the Major's trail in over four days and hoped he had given up. The six men stepped into the well kept establishment.

"Not a good sign, this ones still in one piece," Buck facetiously remarked, receiving slight chuckles from JD and Nathan and a faint smile from Chris.

They didn't see anyone at first, but heard someone in the back room behind the bar.

"Hello, anyone here?" Josiah's baritone voice echoed through the empty saloon. A balding, elderly gentleman stepped out, a towel flung over his shoulder. He was a large man easily as tall and big as Josiah.

"Yeah, what can I do fer ya?" He asked, his eyes narrowing as he quickly scrutinized the six men. He was use to dangerous looking folks, but not six of them at a time, but he also noticed how tired these men appeared and some of his nervousness subsided.

"Friend, we're looking for someone. A gambler type, fancy dresser, brown hair, southern accent," Josiah described prepared for the inevitable disappointment.

The bartender eyed the men suspiciously. There was only two reasons he could think of why men would be trailing someone so hard; either their so-called friend was wanted and these men were the law, or he had wronged these men in some way and they were seeking revenge. He didn't like getting anyone in trouble especially when he didn't know all the circumstances.

"Why ya, lookin' for him?" the bartender reluctantly asked.

This got everyone's attention, this man knew something. Suddenly new life filled the six men and all eyes came to bare on the stonewalling man behind the bar. Vin and Buck grabbed Chris, who was ready to jump over the bar to extract the information anyway he could. Vin flashed his friend a look, which caused Chris to control his rising temper. He was tired and frustrated, and his nerves and patience were on edge. He wasn't in the mood to be played with. It had been a long week and Chris was starting to worry they'd never find Ezra, at least not alive. The bartender had involuntarily stepped back wishing he had grabbed his shotgun. He had seen the look in the dark-clad gunslinger's eyes and it sent a shiver of dread down his spine.

Josiah saw fear come to the bartender's eyes and tried to put him at ease. He placed his massive form in front of Chris' piercing blue eyes, effectively blocking the bartender's view of the easily riled gunslinger.

"Listen sir, he's a friend of ours we're just trying to find him," Josiah tried to assure the nervous bartender.

The bartender looked into Josiah's bearded face and saw hope and despair burning in his blue gray eyes. He looked at the other men seeing the same thing. He ran his hand over his balding pate trying to decide what to do.

JD stepped forward leaning on the bar. "Please sir, we really need to find him. He's our friend." Maybe it was something in the young gunslinger's voice or his sincere boyish face that convinced the large man.

"He was here two nights ago, caught a guy cheatin'. He saved Hiram Stopka from losing his farm," he finally answered.

Buck whooped and grabbed JD picking him up off the floor. Vin slapped Nathan on the back. They were getting closer. Chris remained quiet they had been close before.

"Do you know where he might of headed after leaving here?" Josiah asked.



"Yeah, he's probably still out at the Stopka's home. The cheater drew on him. Lord, I never seen anyone as fast as your friend. He shot the man right between the eyes, but the cheater got a shot off and your friend took a bullet in the shoulder."

The excitement evaporated off the six men and their faces of joy fell.

"Was he hurt bad?" Nathan asked. The bartender chuckled slightly at the black healer's concern for a southerner.

"Nah, I don't think so. Hiram took him to his place so the Misses could fix him up."

"Where is it," Chris asked, hope now awakening within him.

"It's about five miles north of town, you can't miss it just follow the road north until you come to a whitewash post then go east."

The men raced out of the saloon new found energy surging through them as they realized they were very close to finding their missing friend. Bartender shook his head and smiled, then a frown pulled down the corners of his mouth, he wondered if he should of told them about the man who had also come by earlier asking about the missing southerner.

\*\*\*\*\* Part 7

Tommy collided with the fancy dressed gambler, almost knocking him over. Ezra grabbed the door frame to steady himself wincing slightly at the pain in his shoulder.

"Sorry, Mr. Standish I have to go and get some milk," Tommy hurriedly explained. Ezra rubbed the young boy's head as he raced past.

"Why Mr. Standish you're up early?" Anna said noticing that he had managed to put on the clean shirt she left for him. He was also clean shaven which made his dimples more prominent. His shoulder still throbbed slightly, but he felt it was good enough to ride. He didn't want to impose on these people any longer and had planned on leaving after breakfast. He was still a little weak, but thought he could make it to the next town.

"Well Madam, the aroma of that delicious breakfast was more than I could resist."

Anna smiled, she loved his southern accent. Over the past day she had got to know Mr. Standish, she felt he was a good man, but he was also a lost one. Hiram came into the kitchen with an arm load of firewood placing it next to the large wood stove.

"The team's all hitched up and ready to go whenever you want Ezra," Hiram said.

"Well I certainly couldn't pass up on your wife's good ..." Ezra began.

"Ma, Pa!" Tommy's frantic cry got everyone's attention and they raced to the front door. Hiram flung open the door and stepped out onto the

porch followed by Anna and Ezra. What they saw turned their blood to ice. Anna was about to race forward until Hiram grabbed her around the waist. Her eyes were wild with terror as she stared at her young son in the grip of a large and menacing looking man.

The large man had a thick, massive arm around Tommy's neck and his gun pointed at his head. The boy was scared and looked longingly towards his parents. Ezra's heart had stopped at the sight. He pushed past Hiram and Anna.

"Let the boy go, Major!" Ezra sneered. His anger was growing. After everything he'd already been put through, this man had the nerve to threaten a family that had helped him. Ezra wanted to put a bullet through the Major's sadistic heart.

"No problem, I just want you, Standish," Major Quist calmly stated, tightening his grip on the boy.

Ezra stepped off the porch offering himself to the deranged man. Anna feared for Ezra's life and grabbed his arm. He turned and smiled at her seeing the concern in her soft oval face. He gently removed her hand from his arm placing it in Hiram's grasp.

"You," the Major motioned towards Hiram. "See that rope there?" Hiram saw the coil of rope laying on the ground between them. "Get it and tie one end around Standish's hands and make it tight." The Major squeezed Tommy on the shoulder bringing a yelp of pain from the small boy. It took everything Ezra had not to charge the man.

Hiram slowly walked over and picked up the rope keeping his eyes on his son. He returned to Ezra and looked at him regretfully. Ezra clenched his jaw and nodded. Hiram wound the end of the rope around Ezra's wrists knowing he was causing pain in his shoulder. When he finished he turned to the Major.

"Good, now bring it over here and drop it on the ground," the Major instructed. Hiram brought the rope over leading Ezra behind him. He dropped it on the ground and moved back to his wife.

The Major turned his gun on Ezra and shoved the boy towards his parents. Tommy ran past Ezra and into the open arms of his mother. Ezra smiled at the scene, which made it all worth it. The Major picked up the rope and pulled Ezra towards him glaring down at the smaller man. He didn't know why the gambler was smiling, but pretty soon he would wipe that smile off his pretty face. The Major mounted his horse and wrapped the rope end around his saddlehorn then looked towards the Stopka's who feared for Ezra's life.

"Now, if you people are smart you'll forget all about me and Mr. Standish and what just took place. Have a good day." He tipped his hat and nudged his horse into a walk forcing Ezra to follow.

"C'mon maybe we can get to town in time and get the sheriff," Hiram stated running towards the wagon.

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For awhile Ezra listened to the Major's ranting, but he kept speaking in the past then he'd jump to the present and Ezra gave up trying to follow the one-sided conversation. His shoulder throbbed miserably

and the Major would jerk the rope occasionally sending up a flare of pain that would cause him to inhale audibly. He had no idea what the Major had in store for him, but he was glad they were away from the Stopka's. The sun was almost at it's zenith and Ezra was grateful that the day had decided to remain cool. He could see the tree dotted foothills ahead and figured the Major was taking him there so he could easily kill him and hide his body. He was surprised that this didn't seem to bother him much, although he regretted that the others would never know what happened to him. They probably thought he returned to his mother or headed back to St. Louis.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Pa, Look!" Tommy yelled out pointing towards the west, six riders appeared as if out of no where. Hiram pulled the team to a halt.

"Ah shit, now what?" Hiram picked up his rifle and put it across his lap. He wondered if he could out run the men in his wagon, but immediately dismissed the idea. He didn't have anything of value on him, but he feared for his wife and son. He checked his rifle and swallowed the lump of fear which had risen in his throat.

"No, pa it's them, it's the six gunslingers that Ezra told me about," Tommy explained unable to contain the excitement in his voice. "Look, the man dressed all in black."

Hiram squinted and did indeed see a tall man wearing a dark duster and hat he seemed to be leading, riding just ahead of the others; three on one side and two on the other. Anna wrapped protective arms around her son as the six gunslingers approached the wagon. Chris tipped his hat, but before he could say a word.

"You all wouldn't be friends of Ezra Standish?" Hiram asked, hoping his son was right.

"Yes, we would."

"You gotta save him. Some man he called Major took him," Hiram explained. He heard several of the men curse and one wearing a poncho bowed his head.

"Where?" Chris anxiously asked.

"About two miles back."

The six gunslingers spurred their horses and galloped away. Hiram turned his wagon around and headed back hoping they would reach Ezra in time.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 8

The Major glared back from atop his horse at the man he had tied to the end of the rope. Ezra hadn't spoken a word the whole time.

"You know, the Judge went and told my superiors all that I did," Major Quist sneered.

Ezra's head came up as he realized the Major was addressing him, but he remained quiet concentrating on staying on his feet. His shoulder

wound had opened up and was bleeding and he was starting to feel light-headed.

"They took away everything, all my commendations, medals, even my horse. I was on my way to serve six months in a Military prison down in Texas, but I escaped."

Ezra smiled inwardly he hadn't been aware that Judge Travis had done this for him. The Judge's own guilt had forced him to see that justice was met out to the Major.

Major Quist yanked at the rope causing Ezra to hiss as a sharp pain shot up his arm. "You ruined my life!" Quist yelled at the taciturn southerner.

"Well, I guess that makes us even, since you didn't do mine any good either," Ezra sarcastically replied, his green eyes burned with anger and his rising fever.

The Major kicked his horse into a trot forcing Ezra into a run to keep from being dragged. He started boisterously singing some old military cadence as Ezra held onto the rope and continued running trying to watch out for rocks and debris, which might trip him up. The Major held this pace for almost a mile impressed with the gambler's stamina. Ezra looked up catching the malevolent smile on the Major's face and dread settled into his stomach refusing to leave. The Major spurred his chestnut gelding into a gallop bringing Ezra down hard and knocking the wind from his chest. His right knee came down on a rock sending a shock wave of immense pain down to his foot and up to his hip.

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Vin picked up the trail easy enough and slowly followed Ezra's boot marks in the dirt.

"Where is he takin' him?" JD asked.

"I don't know JD, but it won't be good wherever it is," Buck replied.

After about a mile Vin noticed Ezra's steps had widen, he was being forced to run. Vin didn't say anything to the others, but Chris caught the look and also noticed the tracks, they picked up their pace. Vin hoped they wouldn't abruptly change directions. Then his worse fear materialized as he looked at the ground seeing the shallow sweep of dirt.

"Shit, he's draggin' 'im!" Vin yelled back to the others, breaking his horse into a gallop.

The Major looked back at the limp form he now dragged and pulled up his horse. He thought Ezra was dead. He dropped the rope and dismounted walking towards the dust and blood covered body. He drew his gun deciding that if the gambler wasn't dead he'd end it. Just as he reached Ezra's body he heard the sound of horses and drew back taking cover behind a boulder.

Chris saw Ezra first and leapt from his horse even before it came to a stop. A bullet at his feet stopped him from racing to Ezra's side.

The others quickly came abreast of him. A horrified look came to all six of the gunslingers' faces at the condition that their friend was in.

"Sweet Jesus," Josiah murmured grabbing hold of the handle of his revolver and squeezing. He never wanted to kill anyone so badly in his life. Nathan released a quivering breath trying to come to grips with the sight before him.

Ezra was laying face down in the dirt. His brown hair chalked with dust; his wrists bloody and torn. Chris stared at his unmoving friend, hoping...willing some kind of movement, something to show him they were going to be whole once again.

"That's close enough Larabee," the Major called out. Larabee's ice blue eyes burned with a rage that had been buried since the death of his own family. This man would pay dearly for what he's done.

Buck's hand shook as he ran it down his face. JD cast a sidelong glance at the mustached cowboy who looked ready to charge the man at any minute. 'I'll be right behind you, Buck,' JD thought turning his gaze back to Ezra. Vin's quiet blue eyes now burned with a murdering madness.

They'd come so far and were so close, were they too late?

Hiram and Anna pulled up their wagon just behind the six gunslingers. Before they could stop him Tommy leapt from the wagon. "Tommy, No!" Anna yelled. Tommy ran past the gunslingers even as Josiah tried to grab the small boy. Everyone prayed that the Major wasn't so far gone he'd shoot a little boy.

"Please, Mister don't hurt him," Tommy cried out, falling across Ezra's back, his young voice shaking with sorrow. The Major stepped out from his cover, his rifle pointed towards the ground. "He's my friend, please," Tommy pleaded, tears streaming down his young face. His small hands clutching at Ezra's dirt covered shirt.

Major Quist ran his hand through his short hair then rubbed his eyes. The madness faded as an overwhelming sadness came over him. He looked at the small boy seeing his own son at that age and smiled. He'd missed so much of his son's life. He never even really knew Orrin, but it became so important for him to gain his son's respect and admiration, even in death. Major Quist's eyes looked at the battered man and clouded. Ezra's still form was replaced with the dead body of his own son. 'What have I done?' He thought to himself. He had killed his son, it was his fault. This was the first time that Jacob Quist had admitted this to himself, and with that admission the life left him, his shoulders slumped and his face went slack.

Chris holstered his gun and stepped forward. He didn't have to look back to know the others were right behind him. He stopped a few feet from Tommy and Ezra. "Tommy, go back to your parents," he said quietly. His tone broaching no discussion. The boy reluctantly stood, the front of his shirt covered in dirt from Ezra's back. He walked slowly back to his waiting parents.

"It's over Major, all we want is to take Ezra home," Chris stated trying to keep his voice even and calm.

The Major's dull dark eyes met Chris' blue ones and what Chris saw there tempered his anger a little. In that fleeting glimpse he saw a broken man. A man who had lived his whole life riding on the back of his pride, self confidence and courage. When these failed him, his life had become meaningless.

"Everything, everything I loved is gone, my son, my friends. What happened?" he asked, knowing he'd never receive an answer.

A grim smile slowly appeared on the Major's face and he slowly raised his rifle.

"Don't Major," Chris warned flatly, knowing what the Major was about to do. They all drew as one and fired. The Major was dead before he hit the ground the smile still on his face.

Nathan rushed to Ezra's side before the echo of the gunshots died. Buck, JD and Josiah all knelt down on one side of the gambler. Vin cut the ropes which still bound the conman's wrists. Chris didn't move, he just closed his eyes hoping he wouldn't hear what he feared. Nathan searched for a pulse finding a very slow weak one.

"He's still alive," Nathan said quietly, gently turning him over with the others help.

Chris let the relief show on his face and came and knelt at Ezra's side.

"Nathan, is he going to be alright?" Chris turned to Buck's anxious fear-filled voice making no effort to hide the tears that fell down his face.

"He's not in death's door yet, but he's at its welcome mat," Nathan replied. He ran his experienced hands over Ezra's abused body. "He's lost a lot of blood. His shoulder wound has opened again and his shoulder is dislocated. His knee is swelling. I don't know if it's busted or just sprained. He's got several broken ribs and a busted collar bone." Through the whole examination Ezra never uttered a sound or made a move.

Nathan felt Ezra's head and his hand came away bloodied. "We have to get him some place where I can work on him, quick."

At that moment Hiram and Anna came up in the wagon. "Get him in we can take him back to our place."

Nathan and Josiah lifted his shoulders, JD grabbed his head, Buck placed his hands under Ezra's back as Chris and Vin each grabbed a leg, together the six carried Ezra to the wagon and laid him gently down. Nathan climbed in next to him as did Chris.

\*\*\*\*\*Part 9

They laid Ezra gently down on the bed he had earlier occupied. Nathan and Josiah removed his shirt and quickly and expertly put his shoulder back in place. Nathan noticed that not a sound escaped Ezra's lips. Vin cut away the leg of his pants revealing the bruised and badly swollen right knee. Nathan began washing and cleaning Ezra's many abrasions and cuts. Anna and JD kept a constant supply of

clean water and clean cloths coming. Josiah gently wiped his forehead with a cool cloth. Buck and Chris stood close by in case they were needed. It took a couple hours to get Ezra bandaged and cleaned up. Nathan wrapped his knee and propped it up on a pillow. He had to cut into it to release the fluid, which had built up. There was a two inch cut on the front of his head that had to be stitched. Nathan was worried, the cut was very deep and had cracked his skull slightly. He knew Ezra had a bad concussion and hoped he regained consciousness. He didn't speak out loud his fear that Ezra may never come to, his injuries might be to extensive.

Nathan and the others moved morosely into the living area of the cabin. Nathan planned on getting something to eat and then returning to Ezra's side. Anna went into the kitchen to prepare some food, hoping someone would eat. She had to do something a person could suffocate on the depression which filled the room. Chris placed a hand on the hearth and looked into the low burning fire, listening to the crackling of the dry wood.

"Can you really make wolves lie down with sheep?" Tommy abruptly asked Josiah who gaped, slightly bewildered at the awe-struck boy. He then turned to Vin and asked, with the same innocent exuberance. "Ezra says you can track anything, anywhere." Vin smiled at this. Then Tommy's large eyes turned to Nathan. "Ezra will be okay he says you're the best healer there is." Nathan had to fight to keep the tears from spilling over.

Anna entered the room carrying a tray of sandwiches hearing what her son was saying. "You'll have to forgive my son, the way Mr. Standish talked about you all we didn't believe you were real. He told some pretty far-fetched tales."

"How do you all know Ezra?" Hiram asked the six men.

"He's one of us," Chris proudly exclaimed, moving his eyes from the flames and meeting Hiram's hazel eye stare.

"Now that I believe," Hiram declared.

Josiah and Buck took turns telling the Stopka's all that had happened over the past month. Anna's eyes glistened with tears as she listened to all that Ezra had been put through and the loyalty and friendship that these men held for each other.

Ezra remained unconscious for two days. A fever raged through his battered body and the fear of losing him started to whittle its way back into the minds of the men. The six men took turns watching over him and administering to him, but usually they all could be found in various positions on the floor of the room. On the night of the second day Ezra opened his eyes. He didn't know where he was at first, the flickering lantern light distorting the small room. He felt a hand on his forehead and at first thought he was dreaming. Then his eyes focused and he could make out Nathan's dark face smiling down at him. He felt another hand behind his head raising it up to the cup of water that Nathan held. Ezra moved his eyes slightly to look into the face of Josiah.

"How you feelin' Ezra?" Nathan asked. Ezra almost cried thinking he'd never hear those four words spoken again by the dark healer.

"Hurt, all over. What happened?" Ezra gasped. His eyes looked around the room seeing four more indistinct shapes laying on the floor. He swallowed the lump which rose in his throat. They had come for him.

"We'll tell you later just get some rest now." Ezra's eyes slowly closed and he grinned as he realized that Nathan had slipped him one of his concoctions.

The next morning everyone was awoken to Nathan urging Ezra to open his eyes. "C'mon Ezra, you need to wake up for a bit. I need to get some more water in ya." Everyone surrounded the bed to be graced with Ezra's green eyes slowly opening.

Chris gently raised his head so Nathan could give him some water.

"Do you think you could manage some broth?" Nathan asked. Ezra slowly nodded his head and Josiah came over and propped up the pillows. Ezra looked at the six faces that smiled down at him.

"Lord Ezra, we've been chasing after you for two weeks," Buck said.

Ezra swallowed and replied, "I guess it's very fortuitous that you found me when you did." Ezra paused then looked towards Chris. "The Major?"

Chris' jaw clenched. "He's dead," he finally answered.

Ezra couldn't deny the relief he felt, but he was also sadden by this. He had forgiven the Major he knew he wasn't responsible for his actions.

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The next evening the six gunslingers shared a relaxing and mouth-watering dinner with the Stopka family. Ezra's condition had slowly improved over the past day.

Buck was regaling the Stopka's with his many stories and anecdotes, even though he had to clean them up slightly for Tommy's sake.

"What if he still doesn't want to come home with us," JD innocently asked taking a bite of mashed potatoes. His question brought silence to the table.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning Anna slipped into Ezra's room finding Nathan trying to force the recalcitrant gambler to drink some more medicine.

"May I speak with Mr. Standish alone, Nathan?" Anna asked the dark healer. He threw up hands and nodded.

"Maybe you can get him to drink this," Nathan said as he walked out.

Ezra smiled up at the kindly woman who sat down next to him.



"I want to tell you a story, Mr. Standish." Anna clasped her hands together and gathered the courage she would need to relate her story. "I lost my mother and other siblings when I was very young. My father couldn't care for me and passed me from one distant relative to the next. I was abused physically and emotionally." Anna's eyes began to water as some of the long shut away memories came to the surface. "I finally ran away and then was truly alone which I preferred for a long time. I did what ever I had to, to survive." Anna looked straight at Ezra seeming to throw her thoughts into his head. He lowered his eyes in understanding. There was not much a woman alone could do to survive. "I met Hiram at a bordello in El Paso. He saw the real me trapped inside and helped to release that and we fell in love. Even after everything I'd been through in my life I consider myself one of the luckiest people alive. I have a family who loves and protects me and is there for me. They accept me for who I am, past, present, future." Anna paused and swallowed looking into Ezra's emerald eyes searching for understanding. She was surprised to see all that and more.

The calmness of Anna's voice suddenly gave way to a sudden firmness. "Now, there are six men out there who care a great deal about you and I think you care a great deal about them. That's not something you throw away. Not everyone is lucky enough to find one person much less six who care about them."

Anna could see Ezra trying to hold back the tears

"Now, I don't begin to understand what your life or the lives of those six men have been like, but I bet it's been a whole lot better since you all met."

Ezra reached out and took Anna's hand in his. "Dear Lady, you understand more than you know."

Anna stood as Chris and the others entered the room she smiled and quietly walked out.

Everyone had decided that Chris should be the one to try and convince Ezra to return with them since they knew Ezra would take him seriously. Chris had thought about what he was going to say all night, thinking about all the reasons for Ezra to come home and hoping he had thought out all the rebuttals for any and all arguments that Ezra might come up with.

"Okay Ezra, here's how it's goin' to be, you're coming home with us and that's all there is to it we..." Chris began, prepared to recite the speech he had thought about for the past day.

"Yes, Mr. Larabee I will come back with you," Ezra calmly said, looking up at the dark-clad leader, a faint smile on his face at Chris' sudden befuddled appearance. "How can I refuse such a benevolent invitation."

Everyone broke out in laughter. "I guess we won't have to resort to plan B, huh Chris," JD remarked with a glint in his eyes. Buck slapped the young gunslinger up side the head.

"And what pray tell was plan B?" Ezra asked, the mischievous glint returning to his green eyes.

"Oh nothing really, Chris would just knock you out and we'd tie you to a horse," Buck explained, his face breaking out in a grin, ignoring the sneer from Chris.

"Welcome Back Ezra," Vin said. Everyone surrounded Ezra's bed placing a hand on his leg or shoulder. Ezra couldn't stop the tear that slowly made its way down his cheek.

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After a couple more days rest, Ezra was fit enough to travel. The Stopka's lent their wagon, which was filled with straw to make the long trip back as comfortable as possible. The swelling in Ezra's knee had diminished, but he still couldn't put any weight on it so Nathan and Josiah had to carry him out.

Chris sat upon his horse looking down upon the couple and their son who stood on the porch. "Thank you for everything, we'll get the wagon back to you as soon as possible. Were indebted to you all and if you ever need anything you know where to find us."

"Thank you Mr. Larabee that is a comfort," Anna replied. Chris looked down at Tommy and tipped his hat in silent salute, Tommy's heart swelled with pride.

"Pour that laudanum down 'em, Josiah," Nathan instructed, as Josiah practically forced the awful tasting liquid down Ezra's throat.

"Nathan I hate this stuff," Ezra balked, trying to catch his breath in between gulps. He was stretched out on a blanket in the back of the wagon. A canopy had been erected over him using some old blankets. His shoulder was bound as were his ribs. Nathan had placed some blankets under his injured knee. Him and Josiah were going to remain in the wagon to tend to him on the long trek back to Four Corners.

Buck laughed out loud sitting in the driver's seat of the wagon, which earned him a sneer from the hapless conman.

"Yeah, but it'll make the ride home more bearable for you and us, Ezra," Nathan replied. Ezra flashed the same sneer back at Nathan. He was fighting to keep his eyes open as the medicine started to take effect on his weakened body.

Ezra tried to raise a hand hearing the chuckles from his friends. "I'll get even with you all for this," he managed to say before his hand fell back down and his eyes rolled back in his head. Nathan pulled the blanket up to his chin and nodded to Buck, who eased the horses forward. Chris, Vin and JD followed, leading the extra horses. Everyone felt better than they had in weeks, it was good to be heading home.

Anna had stepped inside as the wagon pulled away. She suddenly reappeared at Hiram's side on the porch. "Hiram, I found this on the night stand." She handed him an envelope which he opened. He grabbed his wife's arm as his knees buckled slightly at what he saw inside. He fanned out \$500 and a note.

"For making us whole again,

The Seven"

THE END (Sep 1999)

End  
file.